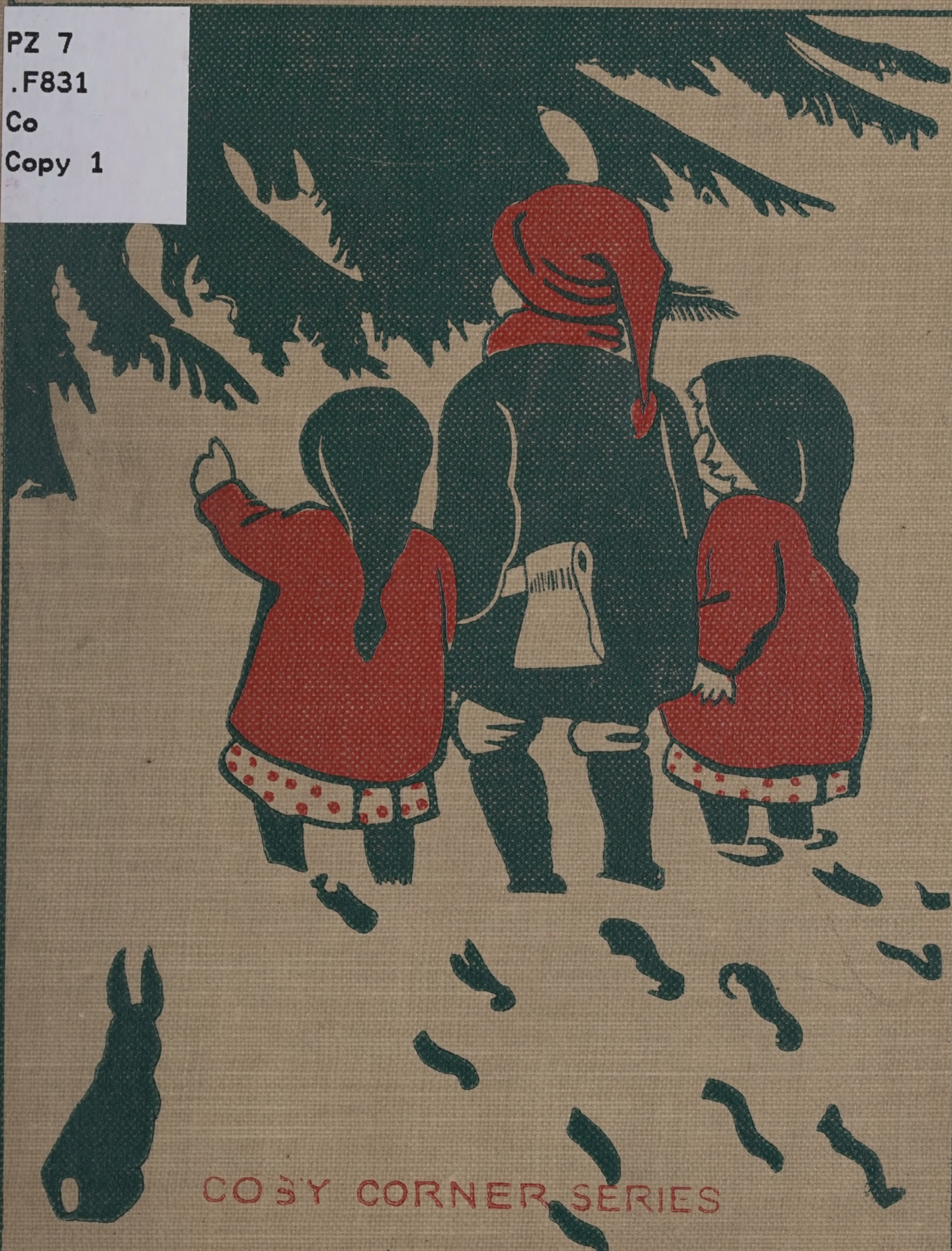


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CHOOSING THE CHRISTMAS TREE.

(See page 99)

Cosy Corner Series

THE COUNTRY CHRISTMAS

By

Frances Margaret Fox

Author of

"Farmer Brown and the Birds," "Little Lady
Marjorie," "Betty of Old Mackinaw," "How Christ-
mas Came to the Mulvaney's," etc.

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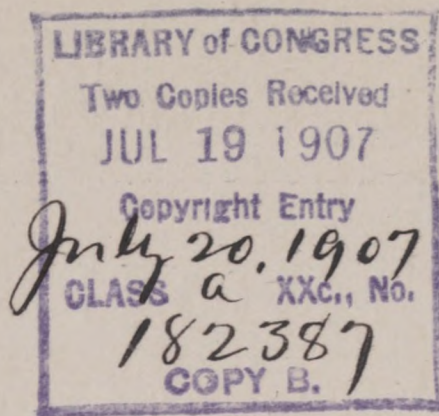
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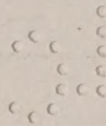
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THE COUNTRY CHRISTMAS

CHAPTER I

HOPE FOR THE MULVANEYS

SALLY BROWN remembered the Mulvaney's. It was no wonder the child talked of them at first; but, when she had lived in the country two months, her mother and brother Alfred begged her to change the subject.

"Give us a rest," was Alfred's repeated command.

"Really, Sally," her mother remonstrated one morning, "what is the use of thinking of the Mulvaney's all the time? If it did any good I wouldn't say a word, but you only make us uncomfortable without helping them in the least."

"Well, mamma," was the reply, "you see I can't help hoping."

"Hoping," mocked Alfred, "hoping for what, I'd like to know?"

"If your name was Chinky Mulvaney you'd guess quick enough," was Sally's retort. "I am hoping the Mulvaney's will get out of the city same as we did."

"Hoping won't get them out," said Alfred.

"Maybe it won't and maybe it will," Sally remarked. "I notice that when you hope for things hard enough, you're pretty sure to get them. That is," she added, "if you do some squirming too. Don't you know, Alfred, you can help things happen if you try. I've discovered there's more'n one way of hoping."

Mrs. Brown was ready to go out. "Sally, my child," was her parting advice, "hope all you wish, but please don't mention the Mulvaney's to Alfred or me for one week."

"She'd never live," Alfred said, as he grabbed his cap and followed his mother.

Sally flew to the kitchen. "I can talk to you about the Mulvaney's, can't I, Mrs. Turner? Now I am ready to wash the dishes. Alfred's gone to the post-office, and mamma

has gone to sew for Mrs. Reuben Smith; that's why I didn't get out here sooner; I had to see them off. Mamma says, — what do you think? — that I mustn't say Mulvaney to her for a week. I can talk to you, though, can't I? ”

“ Indeed you may,” laughed Mrs. Isaac Turner. “ I feel as if I had known the Mulvaneys all my life. Talk about them, of course you may. Is Mrs. Mulvaney a nice looking woman? ”

“ Dear me, no,” laughed Sally, playing with the soapsuds in the dishpan. “ She's about as unpretty as any one you ever saw. She's cross as a bear, too, but who wouldn't be? Just 'magine, Mrs. Turner, if you lived in a horrid little pig-pen house, and you had seven acting children and your Mr. Mulvaney was dead, and you had to take in washing? I do wish they could come out in the country. I wish they could live in this very village. Why, Mrs. Turner, they are the most discouraging children you ever saw. There's Hannah and Chinky and Nora and Dora and Mike and Johnnie and Stubbins, and they all look worse'n they act.”

“Yes,” agreed Mrs. Turner, “I know them every one, Sally, just as well as if I had seen their photographs. Hannah is tall and thin; Chinky is red-headed and freckled; Mike is full of mischief; and Johnnie’s always getting into trouble; and Stubbins is a terror. Now why do you want such a family turned loose in our pretty village?”

“Don’t laugh, Mrs. Turner, because it is dreadful for children not to have better things. They live down by the railroad tracks and the river, in mud and dirt. I think it is worse for them because they have always lived there, and they don’t know anything different. They are not so very bad yet, but you just wait and see what’ll happen if they stay there.”

“How is it, Sally, that you like such children?”

“Because,” was the instant response, “I got acquainted with them. I’ve discovered that you’re pretty sure to like every one if you only get well enough acquainted. I never knew how good Mrs. Mulvaney was until mamma was taken to the hospital, and Mrs. Mulvaney took me and Alfred in. Of course

she was cross and everything, but I'll never forget how good she was to us, nor how she cried for joy, — that's what mamma said, — because they had a gay Christmas for once in their lives. She was glad mamma and Alfred and I could come here to live, too; and now I'll tell you something, Mrs. Turner. I'm not the only one that's hoping. This is exactly what Mrs. Mulvaney said when we talked it over. 'We'll put for the country, too, Sally, if we ever get a chance!' So you see, she wants to come."

Nothing more was said about the Mulvaneys for a week, which doesn't mean that Sally forgot them. It happened this way: Alfred brought a letter from the post-office that Saturday morning addressed to Mrs. Elizabeth Brown, and as Mrs. Elizabeth Brown was away all day, the children passed their spare time wondering about its contents. At night their curiosity was satisfied. A farmer's daughter needed the help of a dress-maker for two weeks. Better than that she wrote, "Come as soon as possible, and bring both your children. They can walk to school every day with my brother."

"That lets me out," declared Alfred; "but you may go, Sally, just the same." To show how little he cared, Alfred whistled "Yankee Doodle."

"Perhaps Mr. Turner would give you a vacation," suggested Sally.

"Wouldn't ask him," was the reply. "When they take a feller to work for his board in a grocery store after school hours, and to do chores around the house, he's got to tend to business or lose his job."

Alfred sometimes put on airs. Sally always felt humiliated when her brother talked about working for his board, and how fortunate it was that one of his mother's children happened to be a boy. "What if we'd both been girls?" he used to ask in tones of scorn. Instead of feeling sorry for Alfred, when she and her mother were driven to the Randall farm, Sally envied him because of his importance at home.

"How do you like it out there?" asked the boy at recess a few days later.

"The only thing I don't like," was the reply, "is coming to school with Tom Randall. I am glad he isn't my brother. He's



“ ‘ HE PUT ON ONE OF HER NEW DRESSES ’ ”

the worst tease I ever saw. Why Alfred, you are a perfect angel beside of him. He made Cornelia Mary cry last night, and she's sixteen."

"Who's Cornelia Mary?"

"She's his sister. He put on one of her new dresses mamma is making, and said he was going to wear it out to milk the cows."

"Did he do it?" inquired Alfred.

"No, his mother made him take it off. He's fourteen and he thinks he knows it all."

"The boys all like him, Sally. If girls weren't so silly they wouldn't have so much trouble."

"You needn't think that bothers me," laughed Sally, "because I want to tell you about the Randalls. They're the nicest people ever, all but Tom. They live in a great big white house with green blinds and wide verandas. It must be lovely in the summer. You ought to see their cows and their horses and their chickens, and when I say chickens I mean everything with feathers; pigeons, ducks, and geese, turkeys, and even guinea hens. Oh, but it's nice. I can't begin to tell you. Cornelia Randall is the sweetest

girl you ever saw, too. She told me to call her Cornelia Mary except when I go visiting her school next summer, then I must say 'Miss Randall,' to set the country children a good example."

"Is she going to be a school teacher?"

"Yes, Alfred, and she says she can hardly wait for summer. She's passed her examination and got her certificate, and she's going to teach over in the Hodgkins district. Tom declares he'll visit her school and make speeches to the children. It would be just like him, and she couldn't put him out either, if she tried. Cornelia Mary says sometimes she wishes she was an only child."

"Nice and selfish," suggested Alfred.

"You never lived with Tom Randall," observed Sally. "There he comes now, and don't you dare tell what I told you."

"Won't I though?"

"Oh, no, you won't, Alfred. Wait a minute," she called, "I want to tell you something. I'm still hoping about the Mulvaney's; they would have such a good time in the country!"

CHAPTER II

SALLY BROWN'S NEW IDEA

THE following Saturday Tom Randall heard some news.

"You can't guess the latest!" he shouted, as he ran up the stairs three steps at a time, reaching the door of the sewing-room out of breath, and beaming with smiles.

"It must be something good," ventured Sally, forgetting to pull basting threads in her eagerness to hear more.

Cornelia Mary looked doubtfully at her brother. "Well, what is it?" she asked.

"Get your camphor bottle ready. I'm going to let you down easy, but you had better be prepared. Corny, your school's gone. You won't teach in the Hodgkins district this year, I can tell you right now."

"What do you mean?"

"Just what I said."

"Did the schoolhouse burn up?"

"Worse'n that."

"Have they hired another teacher?"

"Worse yet."

"Come, Tom, tell us." besought Mrs. Brown.

"He's fooling!" declared Sally.

"No, sir, I mean what I say," insisted Tom. "Corny's school has gone, bag and baggage."

"Well, how could it?" demanded Cornelia Mary.

Tom shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know how it could be so cruel," he said, "but maybe it didn't like to have you for a teacher. Fact is, it's gone. The Beans and the Kilpatricks have got work in the sugar factory, and they moved to town. There goes your A Class and your B Class and —"

"Well, the Chart Class isn't gone," interrupted Cornelia Mary, laughing in spite of herself at Tom's antics. "You can have a school if there's only one child in the whole district and little Willie Jessup begins this summer. Poor little fellow, he'll be lonesome."

"No, little Willie won't be lonesome," mocked Tom, "because little Willie's going too. I tell you, Corny, your school's gone. Cheer up, you've got me left. I'll be home all summer. Never mind the Hodgkins district, let it go."

"You go away," retorted Cornelia Mary, struggling with tears, "you're a comfort, aren't you?"

"It was my painful duty, Corny, to tell you before the neighbours did and this is all the thanks I get, just 'go away.' What an ungrateful world it is. Never mind, Corny, if you ever need a friend, you come back to your sweet brother. He'll forgive you."

"Will you go away!" repeated Cornelia Mary.

"Oh, yes," was the reply, "I mustn't stay in a damp place for fear of rheumatism. Better get up your umbrella, Sally," and Tom went away whistling.

Cornelia Mary did cry, at least she cried until Sally Brown appeared to be very much excited about something.

"What is the matter?" asked Mrs. Brown,

while Cornelia Mary wiped her eyes and stared.

“Why — why the Mulvaney!” exclaimed Sally. “Why can’t they move out here and go to school?”

“Who are the Mulvaney?” asked Cornelia Mary.

“Well, they’re the Mulvaney,” Sally insisted, “and —”

“Can it be,” interrupted Mrs. Brown, “that Sally has never mentioned them to you?”

“Never,” replied Cornelia Mary. “Do tell me about them.”

“You, mamma, you will tell it so much better than I could.”

“It is a dismal story,” began Mrs. Brown, “and one I would gladly have forgotten.”

“Why Mamma Brown!”

“Don’t misunderstand me, Sally; I shall never forget Mrs. Mulvaney’s kindness, but as I have said a dozen times, we cannot help the family and there is no use in continually dwelling upon their misery.”

“Only I can’t help hoping,” murmured Sally. “Go on, mamma.”

When the story was finished, Cornelia Mary turned to Sally with a puzzled look on her face.

"How do you think we could get that family into the Hodgkins district?" she asked. "What would they do? I mean, where would they live, and what could Mrs. Mulvaney do to earn their bread and butter, I'd like to know?"

"Couldn't she take in washing?" demanded Sally.

Cornelia Mary shook her head. "I'm afraid not in the country."

"Oh, but she could," Sally declared. "Mrs. Turner says she could get more washing to do in the village than five women could manage, especially when the summer boarders are there. Mrs. Turner says too she's even wondered why some one doesn't start a laundry."

"But that's in the village and wouldn't help my school any."

"Maybe that's true," agreed Sally, "but couldn't they live in the country, and couldn't Chinky and Hannah go after the washings and take them home? The worst trouble is

finding a place for the Mulvaney's to live. There isn't a house they could get in the village."

"How do you know?" asked Mrs. Brown.

Sally smiled. "Oh, Mrs. Turner and I went house-hunting only last Saturday. We thought maybe we could find a cheap little house, but we couldn't on account of the new sugar factory. Houses are scarce and rents are high. We found out a few things. That's the way I do my hoping, mamma."

"Would they come?" inquired Cornelia Mary, growing interested.

"Come!" echoed Sally, "they'd come flying!"

"Yes, they would," agreed her mother. "There's no doubt of it. But how could we manage, Cornelia Mary? Where could they get a house, and how could they furnish it?"

"Of course they would have to bring their furniture," suggested Cornelia Mary.

"But they haven't anything worth mentioning, even if they could afford the expense. I doubt if Mrs. Mulvaney ever had money enough ahead to buy tickets for the

whole family, and their clothes are unthinkable. No, it is hopeless."

"Don't say that, Mrs. Brown, on account of my school. If there is a way to get them here, Sally and I must do it. Father will help us, I know. Come on, Sally, we'll go and find him. If what Tom says is true, and I'm sure it is because I heard something about it last week, why, there'll be three houses empty and perhaps we may be able to get one of them cheap."

"You never can tell until you try," added Sally.

CHAPTER III

HOUSE - HUNTING

THE Beans, the Kilpatricks, and the Jessups might as well have taken their houses with them so far as the Mulvaney's were concerned. Mr. Bean's father and mother were to live in their vacant house. The Kilpatrick home was rented to an old couple related to the Beans, while the residence of the Jessups was to be torn down.

Cornelia Mary and Sally drove slowly homeward after their first experience in country house-hunting.

"Now what do you think?" inquired Cornelia Mary, giving the reins an impatient jerk.

"I think —" began Sally, "well, I think we got left."

That remark made the girls laugh. Having laughed the prospect seemed less dismal.



“POINTING TO A DILAPIDATED WEATHER-BEATEN STRUCTURE ALMOST
HIDDEN FROM VIEW”

“Wasn’t it too bad about the Jessup house?” Cornelia Mary resumed. “It was so tumbled down the rent couldn’t be much and they might have got along somehow. Was it a great deal worse than the house they live in?”

“Worse,” echoed Sally, “it was sixty hundred times better. Why, the Mulvaneys live in a little bit of a black old shanty —” Sally stopped suddenly, then exclaimed in excited tones, “A house! A house! Whoa!”

“A house?” questioned Cornelia Mary, looking into the sky as if expecting to see it drop from the clouds.

“Right there!” continued Sally, pointing to a dilapidated weather-beaten structure almost hidden from view by overgrown bushes and old weed stalks.

“Giddap,” laughed Cornelia Mary, “trot along. Why, Sally, you gave me such a start. I am sure I know now how Columbus felt when the mariners shouted land.”

“But it’s a house,” insisted Sally, “and no one is living in it. Whoa, horse! Make him stop, Cornelia Mary, I want to get out. Who owns that house and why is it empty?”

“All right, whoa, Bess! Climb out, Sally, you shall see the house, that is if you can reach it without tearing your dress. Wait a minute while I tie the horse to this tree.”

“But it’s deserted!” Sally exclaimed, “and the windows are all boarded up; we can’t see much. Who owns it? Let’s go for the key?”

“No one will ever live in that house again,” declared Cornelia Mary. “To begin with, it’s the oldest house in the country and the man who built it lived in it for a long time. Then he built a new house and his hired man lived here. After that a great many different families rented it; then for years it was empty. One time a crazy man, whose folks owned the mill, broke in the house and said he was going to stay there until he died. The owner said let him have his own way as he was harmless, and if the family would supply his wants he might have the house rent free.”

“And did he live here all alone way back from the road?” asked Sally, gazing curiously about the place.

“Yes, and they say he was happier than

he ever was in his life before; he kept chickens and pigs and had gardens — why, Sally, there is a regular wild flower garden here every summer to this day, and the man's been dead since long before I was born."

"And hasn't anybody lived here since?" asked Sally.

"Of course not."

"Why?"

Cornelia Mary shrugged her shoulders. "Oh, folks are queer about some things, Sally. I wouldn't stay all night in this house for anything, myself, not for anything."

"Why not?"

"Well, don't you see, the old fellow was crazy, and sometimes he used to sing and howl all night long."

"But, Cornelia Mary, he's dead now, and this is a good, big house. It would be a palace for the Mulvaney's. Who owns it?"

"The same man who allowed the poor old lunatic to have it for a home. He's queer, too. I never said anything but 'good morning,' or 'how do you do' to him in my life."

"Where does he live?"

“Oh, just a little way from here around the next corner on the Bay Shore road.”

“What’s his name?”

“Welcome Hodgkins.”

“Oh, he’s the Hodgkins district, is he?”

“No,” laughed Cornelia, “not exactly, although his ancestors gave the district its name. I tell you he’s a queer old fellow — the only Hodgkins left in the country. I really shouldn’t like to call on him, but we’ll do it if you think the Mulvaney’s would live here, and if you’ll do the talking.”

“Well, come on then,” said Sally.

“Oh, Sally, but my heart is set on teaching school this summer; I do hope they’ll come. Yes, I’ll go with you to see Mr. Hodgkins. We’ll walk. He has the best farm in the country but I tell you he’s queer; nobody ever goes to see him. He lives in that large white house straight ahead.”

“But, Cornelia Mary, the blinds are all closed. I don’t believe he’s at home.”

“That’s nothing, Sally, he lives alone in the back of his house. I told you he was queer.”

“Where’s his wife?”

"Dead, years ago."

"Glad to see you, come in," said Mr. Hodgkins, opening wide his kitchen door, at the girls' timid knock.

The man's eyes were so kind and he smiled so pleasantly Sally liked him.

"We've come on an important errand, Mr. Hodgkins," she began. "It's about Cornelia's school. Unless you will help us, Cornelia Mary can't teach school this summer."

"Indeed?" questioned Mr. Hodgkins. "I shall certainly be pleased to do all in my power to assist the young lady."

Sally told him the story of the Mulvaney's. When she finished speaking there was silence for a moment. "Guess he is queer," thought Sally. Mr. Hodgkins's first remark was unsatisfactory, to say the least.

"Oom — um — I dunno," he murmured.

"Is it about the rent?" Sally inquired.

"Ooom — um," replied Mr. Hodgkins.

"Unless you wanted too much money," continued the child, "I think she could manage it. She has to pay rent where they live now."

At that Welcome Hodgkins found his voice. "It's the children," he confessed. "They could have the house and welcome, but I can't say as I relish having the young savages raising Cain on my farm."

"It seems to me they could be trained," faltered Sally.

Something in her tone troubled Welcome Hodgkins. "Come with me and see the house," he suggested, "and we'll consider the matter."

For the first time in years spring sunshine streamed across the threshold of the lonely dwelling among the bushes. Once more the old rooms echoed a childish voice and footsteps from the outside world.

"It's not a bad sort of a house after all," remarked the owner, having lighted the lamp he carried. "Musty and damp now to be sure, but it's roomy and might easily be repaired. Well, I dunno, let them come and if they misbehave, we'll train them."

"Mr. Hodgkins, you're an awful nice man, and Mrs. Mulvaney'll say so too, when she gets my letter."

"I don't know how to thank you," added Cornelia Mary.

"Well, children, here's the key. I'll unboard the windows any time you give the word. I'm thinking, Miss Cornelia Mary, that you and I will have our hands full this summer. Good day."

"Isn't he a nice man?" whispered Sally, as Welcome Hodgkins sauntered homeward.

"Oom — um — I dunno," was the response. "I still think he's queer."

CHAPTER IV

TOM MAKES A SUGGESTION

EVERY one in the Randall family became interested in the fortunes of the Mulvaney's. Even the hired man offered his services in getting the house ready for the new tenants.

"Like enough a little fresh paint'd be a good thing," he remarked.

"Fresh paint," repeated Tom, "yes, sir, that's just the thing to furnish a house with. If I couldn't have but one piece of furniture, I'd take fresh paint. I wouldn't say give me a bed, or a table, or a chair, or a small article like a kitchen stove; no, sir, I'd say, fresh paint for me, if you please, fresh paint or nothing."

"Tom, you are the most consoling mortal," interrupted Cornelia Mary. "We completely forgot about the furniture."

"Jake didn't, though; he knew that as

long as the Mulvaney's had fresh paint they'd be all right. Now, who'll give the paint? Corny, you ought to do it, because think of the salary you'll earn teaching that school."

"Hold on, young man," said Mr. Randall, "Jake's idea is good, and I'll donate all the paint he'll put on."

"Father has a lot left from painting the barn," Cornelia Mary whispered to Mrs. Brown.

"They may have our old kitchen stove, too," added Mrs. Randall. "It's a nice little stove, but we've had no use for it since we bought the range, and it's in the woodshed covered with rust. I should be glad to get it out of the way."

Without warning Tom stood on his head and waved his feet in the air.

"Tom Randall, what possesses you?" asked his mother, giving the pillows on the sitting-room couch a vigorous shake.

"I wish to speak in meeting," explained Tom. "It's no circus performance. Cheer up, Corney, I'll teach the Mulvaney's how to raise their feet instead of their hands when they have to ask questions in school."

"I'll give you a new lesson in shingling if you try it," observed his father, laughing with the rest of the family at the change of expression on Tom's face.

"I was about to make a suggestion," Tom continued. "Now don't giggle, Corny and Sally, I'm serious. I say let's go furniture-hunting all through the country."

"Oh, Tom, you dear!" exclaimed Cornelia Mary. "The very thing! I suppose every one of our neighbours has old furniture in their woodsheds and attics they would be glad to get rid of."

Sally clapped her hands and tried to speak. She had barely time to open her mouth before Cornelia Mary had finished a request.

"Oh, Tom, will you go with us? We'll hitch Bess to the lumber wagon and you drive. Will you?"

Tom considered a moment, as became his dignity, before replying. "I'll go on one condition. If mother and father and Mrs. Brown will let us all stay home from school, we'll begin to-morrow morning."

"Oh, let them," begged Cornelia Mary, "do say yes."

Permission was given, to the great surprise of Master Tom.

“But he’s such a tease,” objected Sally.

“You’re only half-acquainted with Tom,” declared his sister. “He has streaks of real goodness, and when he says he’ll help, he always does it.”

Bess must have thought picnics had begun early when Tom, Cornelia Mary, and Sally scrambled into the lumber wagon the following morning. They laughed so much, and acted so generally foolish, the old horse turned her head several times, as if she couldn’t understand the occasion for such hilarity.

“We must ask for left over rolls of wall paper,” suggested Cornelia Mary. “Jake and father promised to open the house to-day. They are going to put up the stove and build a fire. Mother says that old crazy man was neat as wax, and that the relatives left the house in perfect order after the funeral.”

“How many rooms in the shebang?” questioned Tom.

“Let me think; there’s a sitting-room, a

bedroom, a dining-room, and a kitchen downstairs. I think Mr. Hodgkins said there were three rooms up-stairs, didn't he, Sally?"

"Yes, three rooms, and kind of an attic over the kitchen. Oh, what will the Mulvaneys think? They have only two little rooms and a place above for the children to sleep, where they live, and the children were never in a decent house in their lives. They are not used to furniture, let me tell you. They didn't own but one real bed."

The first donation was a what-not, given by Mrs. George Saunders.

"That thing'll be a comfort," commented Tom.

"It'll help fix up the sitting-room," commented Cornelia Mary.

"What's it for?" asked Sally.

"To stand in the corner," was the reply. "You're supposed to put pretty things on the shelves."

"Hope nobody'll give us another," faltered Sally.

Deacon Trowbridge happened to be thinking of buying new furniture. He was glad to help load his old lounge, two arm-chairs,

and a marble-topped table upon the lumber wagon.

"Furniture's picking up," remarked Tom as he drove on.

Before the day was done the old horse was resting her feet in the barn, while the Randall family, including grandfather and the hired man were examining second-hand furniture in the woodshed.

"I wouldn't have believed it possible," said Mrs. Brown.

"Nor I," Mrs. Randall added. "Do you see the lace curtains! And if there isn't Mrs. Moses Pendleton's old sewing-machine! I didn't suppose she'd give a thing. How did it happen, Cornelia Mary?"

"You see, mamma, I knew that woman had two machines because I was there the day the new one was brought home, and I suppose she guessed what I was thinking about when Sally told the story."

"Oh, but I'm getting sick of telling that old story," laughed Sally. "I'll be glad when we get through collecting furniture."

The hired man kept his word. With a great deal of advice and more or less help

from the children he painted, papered, and got the house in order inside and out. Many of the neighbours assisted with the work of settling, then went home to ransack their attics afresh to supply newly discovered needs.

In the village Mrs. Isaac Turner used her influence. Through her efforts a barrel of flour and a box of groceries found their way to the Mulvaney pantry. Tubs and a wash-boiler were purchased by the future school teacher. Inspired by her example Tom made a wash-bench. It was a good one, too, strong and heavy. Mrs. Brown bought the material and Sally hemmed towels. Mrs. Randall provided sheets while Mr. Randall gave a generous load of wood.

At last, when all was ready, Sally wrote to Mrs. Mulvaney.

CHAPTER V

SOMETHING HAPPENED

It would be hard to say who was more surprised by Sally's letter, the postman or Mrs. Mulvaney. Both stared doubtfully at the envelope, the postman appearing unwilling to leave the letter, while Mrs. Mulvaney was equally uncertain of her right to it. The children were out. When the postman was gone their mother put a stick of wood in the kitchen stove, poked the clothes in the boiler, glanced at the wash-tubs, then went in the Other Room.

"Well, I never!" she remarked, turning the envelope over and over before opening it. "I wonder what Mulvaney would think!"

Three times while Mrs. Mulvaney was reading the letter she opened and closed her mouth without uttering a sound. The fourth time she managed to say, "Well I never!"

At last she returned to the wash-boiler and poked the clothes so vigorously it is a wonder she didn't punch holes through them. Next she made an attack on the wash-tub. She flipped, flapped, and jerked the clothes over the board, pounded on the soap, and worked with such energy Johnnie didn't dare enter the kitchen. He always peeped in the window before venturing further.

"She'd spank us," he murmured, running to warn his brothers and sisters to "keep back."

It was well that he did so. His mother was in no mood to be trifled with. In the shortest possible time the washing was finished and hung on the line.

"Now then," said Mrs. Mulvaney, going in the Other Room and searching under the bed for an old stocking which she dragged forth quickly, "we'll see."

"More in it than I thought," she went on, pouring the contents in her lap, then rapidly counting the money. "Eight tickets! It won't take long to find out what they'll cost. I'll go to the Grand Central Station and price them. Where's my good skirt?"

The garment was easily found. It was on the floor in the corner with soiled clothes and various other articles. Mrs. Mulvaney slipped it over her working-dress unmindful of apron strings sticking through the placket hole in the back.

"Now my bonnet," she continued. Mrs. Mulvaney owned a bonnet, but where to look for it was perplexing. She found it under the bed, then twisted her hair in a tighter knot before putting it on. Finding her shawl was a harder matter, until Mrs. Mulvaney recalled having placed it over the dishpan in which the bread was rising, or trying to rise.

"Now I'm ready; I wonder where the young ones are? Hannah, Hannah Mulvaney?" she called from the kitchen door, "step lively, you're all to come in this minute."

Obedience was a shining virtue in the Mulvaney family. The children came.

"Why, ma," protested Mike, "you ain't going to leave us, I hope."

By way of reply Mrs. Mulvaney jerked Mike through the doorway, knocking him against Johnnie with such force the little

fellow sat down in the dishpan containing the uncovered bread dough.

“Don’t stir out of this house while I’m gone,” commanded Mrs. Mulvaney, sailing away without looking behind, which was a fortunate thing for Johnnie. Before his mother’s return he had scraped off most of the dough from his trousers, with the help of the twins.

“Kind o’ sthicky, ain’t it?” commented Stubbins, tasting of the dough. “Thay! I’d give a thent to know where ma went.”

“Maybe she ain’t never coming back,” suggested Hannah, after a long silence.

“Yes she is; look alive, kids,” shouted Chinky, “she’s coming like the fire engine. Watch out!”

“I bet she’s been after a policeman, and we’ll all get took to jail,” whispered Johnnie, looking for a place to hide and finding none.

When Mrs. Mulvaney returned she said nothing at first, and the children were too frightened by her behaviour to dare speak. They didn’t know what to think as they watched their mother count eight green slips of paper which she afterward pinned inside

her dress. The next astonishing performance was the writing of a postal card which the woman straightway mailed.

“Whath going to happen?” questioned Stubbins. No one knew.

“My thaketh!” was a later exclamation from Stubbins. “My thaketh alive! Here cometh the thecond-hand man with ma!”

Even his errand was a mystery to the seven, as before he was invited in, the children were turned out.

That night when Chinky carried the washing home, he told the customer that it was the last work his mother would ever do for her.

“Why?” demanded the woman.

“Can’t prove it by me,” was the reply, “I dunno no more about it’n you do.”

The next morning the second-hand man called at eight, and carried away the stove, the wash-boiler, the tubs, Mrs. Mulvaney’s bed and bureau, the few chairs, in fact everything that he could possibly sell. By this time the children were absolutely terrified.

“We’re going to move!” announced their mother. “What’s more, we’re going to have

a ride on the cars. You must all wash up and I'll tidy your hair. Then we'll get ready to start. We ain't got a trunk to pack things in, but we've got pa's satchel. Eight of us ought to carry what's left here in our hands."

"How'll we take all the clothes that was give to us Christmas?" asked Hannah.

"You'll wear 'em," was the reply. "You ain't got but three dresses to your name, and if you can't get 'em all on, you ain't good for much. Thin as you be, I don't know but you'll hold more clothes than just your own. We'll see."

Mrs. Mulvaney began on poor Stubbins. He was plump and given to stumbling anyway, but by the time his mother had squeezed him into two suits and three overcoats of various sizes, he could scarcely wiggle, nor could he bend his arms.

"I'll tie up a little bundle of stuff for you to carry in one hand," said Mrs. Mulvaney, "and you can take the clothes-stick in the other. It's too good to leave behind. Now don't you stir," she continued, "until the others are ready."

"Well, ma," grumbled Stubbins, "I

couldn't sthir if I wanted to. I sthick out all around ith like a pig. I thay! I'm too warm!"

Mike laughed at Stubbins, so Mrs. Mulvaney chose him for the next victim. He quickly felt and looked like his little brother.

"You can take the kerosene can in one hand, and the dishpan in the other," said Mrs. Mulvaney. Then Mike felt worse than Stubbins, but protest was useless. He had to carry the kerosene can and the old dishpan.

Johnnie looked too pleased, whereupon he was taken in hand, — "rigged out," as his mother said. "You can carry the wash-board," she went on, "it's almost as good as new; I don't care what the second-hand man had to say."

"Oh, ma," besought Johnnie, "let Chinky carry the wash-board, he's bigger. I might fall and break it."

Mrs. Mulvaney was so in the habit of spanking Johnnie she began as usual, before she thought how well padded he was.

"Thay, ma, you'll have to thlap him," advised Stubbins. "He ith only got hith fathe."

“Lucky for once,” chuckled Mike. Even Mrs. Mulvaney laughed.

In the meantime Hannah made clothes-racks of Nora and Dora. Fearing she might



have to carry the rusty tin pails herself, she asked her mother what she wished to put in them for the twins to take.

“Provisions,” was the reply, “you can pack up the bread and whatever’s left in the cupboards. Get your own extra clothes on

right lively now. You're to carry pa's picture. The frame ain't heavy and you know how to be careful."

"Maybe I better take the pails an' you carry the picture," objected Hannah. "I'm afraid I might spoil it. It's all I can do to manage my arms on 'count of so many sleeves."

"I'll take the picture," offered Chinky, trying to evade the mop, broom, clothes-line, pole, and clothes-pin basket his mother thrust upon him.

"You'll carry what I say," declared Mrs. Mulvaney, putting on all the garments she owned. Then she packed Mr. Mulvaney's old satchel so full the sides burst.

"I can tie it up," said she, tearing a strip from a ragged blanket for the purpose. "I'll have to carry pa's satchel and make these quilts and things into a bundle. There now! there are two of your pa's old coats. Who'll take 'em? Can't carry 'em, you say, got your hands full? I'll fix it, Chinky, you can wear one and Hannah can wear the other. Hold still and I'll button them around you.

They're just short enough so they won't drag."

"Look here, ma?" offered Chinky, "you roll 'em up in a tight bundle and I guess I can carry 'em after all."

"I thought you could manage," agreed Mrs. Mulvaney. "You see we're going where I may get some time to do fancy work, and I'm thinking of making rugs of pa's old coats to remember him by."

"Oh, ma, look at us!" wailed Hannah when the procession was ready to start. "Have we got to go looking like this?"

"I don't see no other way and you needn't feel bad, Hannah, because we don't look stylish. You may be a school teacher some day," predicted her mother. "Fact is we're all going to have a chance to be folks, and if I was you young ones, I'd try and forget what we look like now, and think hard about how fine we'll look next time we go on the cars with our trunks and umbrells and land knows what; and when we all get set down in the Grand Central Station to wait for the cars, I'll tell you where we're going and all about it."

“Thaketh alive, ma! it don’t theem ath if I could ever get there with tho many thingth on, and thay! but you look —”

“You start your boots,” interrupted the mother of Stubbins, “or you’ll feel worse’n you look.”

CHAPTER VI

HOW STUBBINS WENT TO SEE MR. HODGKINS

TOM RANDALL, Cornelia Mary, and Sally met the Mulvaney's with a lumber wagon. In spite of all Cornelia Mary could do to prevent such actions, Tom fairly shouted when he saw the family lifted from the train by the grinning brakeman, while Sally's face was the colour of a poppy as she went forward to greet her friends. It wasn't easy to claim the Mulvaney's in the presence of the amused passengers, whose faces filled the car windows. It was a relief to hear the engine whistle and see the train start.

"We're going right straight to your house," Sally told Mrs. Mulvaney. "Mamma is there this morning waiting for you. Why won't the children talk? What's the matter? Have they lost their tongues?"

"They never was on the cars before," ex-

plained Mrs. Mulvaney, "and they behaved real well. They act kind of bashful now." Whereupon the seven looked foolish, and wouldn't speak to Sally. Even Stubbins was dumb.

"This is your new teacher," Sally continued by way of introducing the family, "and that boy on the front seat is her brother Tom. Climb in, children. Where will you sit, Mrs. Mulvaney?"

"I'll just hist myself on to the front seat with the boy," was the reply, and that must have been the reason Tom drove home by way of Park's Corner instead of through the village.

"Why, Tom," remonstrated Cornelia Mary, "it's three miles farther the road you've started on!"

"Want to give your school a chance to see the country," was the response. "Geddap, geddap!"

"This spring air won't hurt anybody," Sally put in. "Oh, Hannah, isn't it lovely? Aren't you ever going to talk again, Hannah?"

Not a word from Hannah. Stubbins was the first to find his voice. "Oh, pigth, pigth,

thop the horthel!" he cried. "Thay, boy, I want to thee the pigth!"

"Whoa!" said Tom. "Didn't you ever see pigs before, Stubbins?"

"Yeth, but I never thaw pigth in the country, did I?"

"Do you like pigs?"

"I geth I do! Are they pigth where we are going?"

"Giddap," repeated Tom, pulling at the reins, and then turning so that he could look at Stubbins he said this:

"Pigs? Why, I should say yes! Look here, Stubbins, there are so many pigs in the country they run wild — wild, I say, and if any little kid is a pig catcher all he's got to do is catch a pig and keep it if he can. You can even take pigs to school here, ride 'em right into the schoolhouse if the door's open."

Stubbins glanced inquiringly at Cornelia Mary, but she and Sally were busy talking with Mike and Johnnie, while Chinky and Hannah were busy listening to them. Mrs. Mulvaney was thinking, and paid no attention to Tom's nonsense.

"Thay, boy," suggested Stubbins, "leth

thop the horthes and go back and get thome pigth now."

"Haven't time," was the reply, "plenty of wild pigs all through the country; you'll want something to do when you get home."

During the rest of the drive, Stubbins hugged his bundle and dreamed of pigs, and after a few minutes' silence Tom entertained Mrs. Mulvaney with stories of the house in which she was to live.

"I wouldn't stay in that house over night for one thousand dollars!" he remarked.

"Land sake, why not?" asked the woman.

In low tones lest Cornelia Mary should overhear, Tom did his best to scare Mrs. Mulvaney. He told nothing but the truth, but he handled the truth in such a way Mrs. Mulvaney felt cold chills going up and down her back in spite of all the clothes she had on. At last she spoke.

"Now that's enough, young man," she said, "and if I ever catch you telling my young ones any of that stuff, I'll shake some sense into you. You'll be more rattled-headed than you are now, if I ever lay hands on you."

“Giddap,” remarked Tom, astonished for once in his life.

If Heaven had opened to receive the Mulvaneys, they could scarcely have been more pleased than when the new home was reached.

Early in the afternoon Stubbins slipped away from the family and went in search of wild pigs. Tom was right. Back of the house was a field of small pigs. Stubbins gave a shout of joy and started in pursuit. He caught a little pig easily, and carried it, kicking and squealing, to his new home.

The family were in the sitting-room and didn't hear Stubbins when he carried the pig through the kitchen, the dining-room, and up the stairs. Into the attic over the kitchen he thrust the pig, then returned to the field for another. In less than an hour, five pigs were in that attic and Stubbins was happy.

“Now I think I thaw a nithe big pig thomewhere,” he remarked, climbing a fence, and looking carefully over the fields of his neighbour, Welcome Hodgkins. Sure enough! Beyond the field in which he caught the five was one big pig. Away flew Stubbins. It

wouldn't be so easy to get that pig home because it was too big to carry.

"Come, pig, pig, pig," called Stubbins, "nithe piggie, come pig."

The nice pig looked up, and said, "Ooof — ooof — ooof! Ugh — ugh — ugh!"

Stubbins ventured nearer, but the pig took alarm and trotted grunting across the field. The pig had four legs and Stubbins only two rather uncertain ones; nevertheless, after rather an exciting chase, the pig was caught.

"Now, mithter, how will I get you home? Hold sthills; here, I geth I'll have to get on and ride the way that boy thed. Geddap over to the gate. Hold sthills till I get hold of your ear. Wait, I thay!"

The pig wouldn't wait, and Stubbins wouldn't let go. Clinging to the creature's ears, he somehow managed to scramble on its back. Then began a wild ride.

"I didn't know a pig could go tho fatht," gasped Stubbins, hanging on for dear life, while the pig squealed and squealed and squealed. "Why, thay! What you trying to do, pig?" grumbled Stubbins, as the animal

began rubbing him against the fence corner.
“Oh, I thay, get out of thith!”

The pig got out, but he made straight for the barnyard where Welcome Hodgkins was



feeding the chickens. There was a scattering of poultry as the pig dashed beneath a wagon in the middle of the yard; landing Stubbins — bump — swish! on his back in the mud.

“Sthop the pig,” cried Stubbins, struggling to his feet, “thop my pig I thay!”

“See here, youngster, that’s my pig!” de-

clared Welcome Hodgkins. "Who are you, anyway, and what are you trying to do with my pig?"

"I'm Thubbinth, and I wath taking the pig to my houthe. I didn't know it wath your pig, and I didn't come to thee you, tho there!"

CHAPTER VII

PIGS IN THE ATTIC

STUBBINS MULVANEY was naturally honest. Mr. Welcome Hodgkins was kind. So it came about that when the man talked pleasantly to the muddy boy about the rights of farmers and the ownership of pigs in particular, the child grew red in the face and looked uncomfortable.

“Thay!” he burst out, “I geth I thole five pigth. That boy thed pigth wath wild, tho I took thome home. I put ’em up sthairth, where they’d keep thafe. Do you th’pothe they wath your pigth?”

“Of course they were my pigs,” replied the man, “and you must take them carefully back to the field. Wait a minute! If you go to your mother all covered with mud I’ll warrant you’ll get spanked.”

“Thath nothing,” was the reply, “ma ith

uthed to mud and if I get thpanked I ith uthed to that, tho ith all right. Thay! I like pigs. Do you care if I thee you feed your pigth?"

"Certainly you may, and I'll tell you what, youngster," said Mr. Hodgkins, "I believe you're a pretty good boy. After you put the five pigs where they belong, you come over and have a talk with me, will you?"

"Yeth, thir," and Stubbins left the barnyard fast as he could go, except by riding a pig bareback.

In the meantime the five pigs in the attic had been playing Pussy Wants a Corner, or Tag, or some other game that kept their twenty feet continually pattering. Sally noticed them first.

"Hush, everybody," she cautioned. "I thought I heard something go trot — trot — trot right here in the house."

Sure enough. When the children stopped their merry chatter, the sound of many feet could not be mistaken.

"Stubbins is up to something," said Mrs. Mulvaney. "Go call him, Hannah."

The child obeyed, but no Stubbins responded inside or outside of the house.

“It ain’t Stubbins,” declared Hannah, her eyes wide with fear. “What can it be?”

Mrs. Mulvaney, Cornelia Mary, and Sally remembered the stories they had heard, stories that had kept the house empty so many years.

“It must — must be imagination,” declared Cornelia Mary, whose lower teeth seemed trying to break her upper teeth.

“We’ve all got ears,” remonstrated Chinky.

“It’s Stubbins,” insisted Mrs. Mulvaney, “and I’ll give it to him for being so smart and not answering Hannah.”

Upstairs went Mrs. Mulvaney, but she came down faster than she went up. “It beats all,” she declared, “there ain’t nobody in the house but us — and do you hear that noise again? I ain’t afraid, but when I opened the attic door I heard some one cough, and then he laughed, though it sounded more like a squeal.”

“Listen, now,” faltered Sally, “hear that trot — trot — trot, again?”

Being a woman of action, Mrs. Mulvaney lighted a lamp. “I’m going in that attic and look around,” said she. “I don’t care if you all come along.”

"I ain't afraid," bragged Chinky.

"Hold your tongue," said his mother, leading the way toward the attic.

Neither Cornelia Mary nor Sally could have spoken had they tried. Their jaws wouldn't work. As for their knees, one minute they were stiff as the joints of a Dutch doll, the next the poor girls could scarcely stand. Johnnie was whimpering. Hannah and the twins clung together. Only Mike and Chinky pretended not to be afraid, as Mrs. Mulvaney climbed steadily upward. By the attic door she paused, surrounded by her followers.

"Trot — trot — trot — patter — patter — patter," a shuffling sound, then all was still.

"Open the door, Chinky, and step in," whispered Mrs. Mulvaney.

"You go first, ma, 'cause you got the light," begged Chinky. Mrs. Mulvaney boxed his ears, and as the sound was repeated in the attic, it didn't make it easier for Chinky to open the door. His mother pushed him in.

"Now what do you see?" she said.

"Nothing," chattered the boy, his very freckles growing pale beneath the lamp light.

It happened that the pigs were hiding behind a box back of the chimney. One gave a little thin squeal just as the light was blown out. Another said "Oof — oof!" Mike and Chinky bolted down the stairs. They thought the pig said, "Boo — boo!" only of course they didn't know they fled from the voice of a pig.

When Stubbins reached home the house was still. The family were shivering in the sitting-room, talking in whispers.

"Let's keep still and see what Stubbins says," suggested Sally. "Why, he's going upstairs!"

Mrs. Mulvaney and the children ran into the dining-room, but scarcely had they crossed the threshold before the pigs began to squeal, and Stubbins was heard shouting:

"Hold sthill, pig, hold sthill! Thay! Wait! Ith tho dark you make me bump my head."

"I'll bump your head," called Mrs. Mulvaney. "What are you doing with pigs in this nice, new house, you bad boy?"

"Oh, ma, don't sthpank me, I thought they



"A CLEANER IF NOT A BETTER BOY."

wath wild pigth, and I put 'em here tho they'd be thafe, but I thed I'd take 'em back."

After much squealing and kicking the five pigs were caught and carried to the field by Hannah, Chinky, Nora, Dora and Johnnie. Stubbins was needed in the kitchen where he was given what you might call a double spanking; one for taking the pigs, the second for scaring his mother.

The spanking finished, Stubbins was asked to tell about his meeting with Welcome Hodgkins. The child repeated every word. Mrs. Mulvaney listened quietly until her young son confessed that he said his mother was used to dirt. Then she spanked him until the dishes rattled in the cupboard. After that Mrs. Mulvaney put different clothes on Stubbins, scrubbed his hands and face until the skin was raw, brushed his hair so hard his head swam, and sent him a cleaner if not a better boy, to call on Welcome Hodgkins.

"You can't be folks unless you keep looking decent," declared Mrs. Mulvaney, "and don't you ever let me know of your telling the neighbours that your mother's used to

dirt, or I may put you in the boiler and boil you clean next time."

That is the way Mr. Hodgkins was led to believe that Mrs. Mulvaney was an uncommonly neat woman, the day he and Stubbins became friends.

CHAPTER VIII

STUBBINS AND CHINKY LEARN THEIR NAMES

LITTLE by little Mrs. Mulvaney remembered her old country home. Little by little the springtime breezes, sweet and fresh, smoothed the wrinkles from her brow, and softened her voice.

“Thay, ma,” declared Stubbins one Sunday morning, when the birds were singing from every swaying branch, and the green world seemed bursting with joy, “Thay, do you know I think you’re moht ath pretty ath Mitheth Brown, and Mr. Hodgkinth he thay —”

Here Hannah put in a few words. “Ma, I do wish you had a best dress. We live in such a nice house and everything, I wish —”

“Go on, Stubbins,” interrupted Mrs. Mulvaney, “what did Mr. Hodgkins say?”

“He thay he thinkth I’ve got a awful nithe ma.”

“Pshaw, now, what makes him think so?”

“Well, he thay that ever thinthe he thed he’d give uth milk, if we’d come after it, he can’t help but notithe that uth kidth ith alwayth clean when we come over there, and he thay it sthpeakth well for our ma.”

“There now, is that all he says?”

“Oh, no, he thay he likth to have uth live here. He thed he wath afraid uth kidth would be a nuithanth and he ith ’greeably thurprithed. He thayth we do what he tellth uth to and he thinkth we’ll all be farmerth we learn thingth tho quick. I think we’re pretty nithe kidth mythelf.”

“You are improving,” admitted Mrs. Mulvaney. “What does Mr. Hodgkins think of our garden?”

“Oh, he thayth he thinkth ith fine. He thayth the way our ma keepth tho many kidth bithy ith wonderful. He thays too when he theeth the clotheth on the line after you hang them up, they ith tho white, ith like thnow, and he thay no wonder you get work to do. I thed uth kidth help a lot.”

“Stubbins,” questioned Mrs. Mulvaney with a curious look in her eyes as she gazed over the broad fields and orchards belonging to Mr. Welcome Hodgkins, “What does he say when you young ones tell him that I’m — that I’m apt to be cross, and that you get all the spankings you deserve, hey?”

Stubbins laughed. “Thay, ma, do you th’pothe uth kidth ever tell about our lickunth? Well, I geth not! You mutht think we’re thilly! But thay, ma, thereth one thing Mithter Hodgkinth thay he can’t understand?”

“Well, what is it?”

“He thayth he thinkth ith queer a thivilithed woman like you couldn’t get nameth for all of uth kidth. He thayth Thubbinth ithn’t a name and he thay how did I come by it?”

Mrs. Mulvaney caught Stubbins by the shoulders and shook him. “You simpleton!” said she, “why didn’t you know enough to tell him your real name slipped your memory, that your folks called you Stubbins when you were little because you were always stubbing your unlucky toes.”

“Why, ma!” protested Hannah, “He

never was named; you know Stubbins is the only name he's got."

Mrs. Mulvaney threw her slipper at Hannah. "You know a lot, don't you, Miss? Now listen, all of you. Johnnie, Mike, come here. You seem to have forgotten this boy's name."

"He ain't never had no name," declared Johnnie, dodging behind Chinky to escape the spanking he seemed to expect when his mother looked at him as she did at that moment.

"You donkeys!" exclaimed Mrs. Mulvaney. "Dust out your ears now and you'll hear something. Stubbins's real name is Moses Aaron Mulvaney. Do you hear, Stubbins? Your meetin'-house name is Moses. When you start school, your name is Moses. When a man asks who you are, answer Moses. Do you understand?"

"Oh, oh," wailed Stubbins, "Oh, thaketh alive, my name ith Motheth! Oh, thay, ma, I don't want Motheth for my name. Motheth, Motheth, Motheth!"

"Oh, ma," besought Hannah, "think up another. Don't let's have that for his name. Let's call him Willie or —"

“Hannah,” insisted Mrs. Mulvaney, “that boy’s name is Moses Aaron Mulvaney. You can’t change names. Maybe now you’d like to be called Aribella or Fiddle-de-dee, but you’re Hannah and he’s Moses!”

“Oh, Motheth, Motheth, Motheth!” grumbled Stubbins. “Oh, thaketh alive, Motheth!”

“What’s Chink’s name, ma?” demanded Mike, with a gleeful grin which lasted but a minute, owing to a pinch from Chinky which changed the expression of his face. “Ouw —” he began.

“Shut up!” warned Chinky, “don’t you know enough to keep your mouth shut?”

“Yeth,” said Stubbins, “if I’ve got to be Motheth, who ith he?”

“Don’t you remember?” asked Mrs. Mulvaney, “why, Chinky’s name is Ezra Jonathan.”

“Ezra Jonathan!” groaned Chinky, his red hair and freckles looking startled. “Oh, ma!”

“The idea of trying to be folks and not knowing your own names. I guess you’ll remember ’em now, Moses Aaron and Ezra

Jonathan. Not's I care what Mr. Hodgkins thinks, 'cause it's none of his business what your names are. But just the same you want to do everything you can to keep on the right side of him on account of our living in his house. You make yourselves useful to him and don't never be sassy or he might turn us out. Mind that. You show him what a comfort children can be, don't never do what he don't want you to, and always do what he tells you to."

Five children cheerfully promised to do as their mother advised, but poor Chinky and Stubbins simply grunted an assent, followed a minute later by two exclamations.

"Ezra Jonathan!"

"Oh, Motheth!"

CHAPTER IX

HANNAH'S PINK DRESS

SUMMER came, and the Mulvaney's prospered. Their garden grew and the neglected fruit-trees flourished. Mr. Hodgkins gave Stubbins two pigs, and the twins were given a flock of hens, whereupon Chinky earned some money, bought two turkeys, and by the time three of the hens were ready to set, his turkeys did the same thing; and the curious part of it is that each one of the eggs hatched, and every little chicken and little turkey lived.

Often when Chinky was tired of weeding the garden or hoeing corn, he sat upon the fence and counted the money he hoped to possess in the autumn when he took his turkeys to market. If his mother saw him wasting his time, he was obliged to continue his thinking while he worked.

"Ma's getting so she won't let a feller stop

to wink," Johnnie grumbled one morning, when he was Chairman of the Committee on Potato Bugs.

"She's a regular general," added Chinky, hoeing corn with all his might, "and you young ones 'll get cured of being so lazy."

"Lazy, is it?" retorted Mike. "You go look at the front yard, mister, and say lazy if you dare, and you ain't afraid of getting your nose punched."

"That's what," agreed Johnnie, "the minute we get home from school, it's 'have you done this,' and 'have you done that,' and 'start your boots!'"

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Johnnie Mulvaney!" began Hannah, but she stopped for a minute because seeing her open mouth, Mike threw a potato bug into the cavern.

"You horrid boy," she sputtered, "I'd make you work harder'n ma does if I could, and you'll be sorry next week when I ain't here!"

"Why, thay, Hannah, where you going?" asked Stubbins.

"I'm going away, and you boys'll have to

make the beds and tidy up, and wash the dishes, and I'm glad of it. Wish I was never coming back. You're such a ungrateful set."

At the end of this speech Hannah was so pelted with potato bugs she fled from the field. The next day the little girl left home to earn fifty cents a week for two months helping in Mrs. Randall's kitchen.

As a matter of fact the Randalls had all the help they needed, but from the first day of school, Cornelia Mary had taken a fancy to Hannah, and had begged her mother to give the child a chance to learn how their neighbours lived. So, while Hannah washed dishes for fifty cents a week, she learned how to wash dishes properly. When she helped set the table and get the meals, she saw how such things should be done. When she made the beds with Cornelia Mary, she began to understand how sheets were used.

As the days went by, even the five little Mulvaney's who met Hannah in school every day, noticed a change in their sister. She outgrew her rude way of speaking, and looked and acted like a different girl. She kept her hair combed prettily, proud of the bright rib-

bons given her by Cornelia Mary. She learned to sew on buttons, and to keep her clothes in order.

“Straight, plain dresses aren’t meant for thin little girls,” observed Mrs. Randall, “so we’ll make over some of Cornelia Mary’s old ones for Hannah.”

The first Sunday Hannah wore one of the new dresses she blossomed out like a full blown rose.

“Run home and show your mother, child,” said Mrs. Randall.

“Well, I never!” exclaimed Mrs. Mulvaney, as the pink blossom joined her family beneath an apple-tree. “If she don’t look like a posy with the pink bow on her hair, and such a splendiferous dress. Well, there now! I suppose you won’t never want to come back to live with your poor old ma.”

“Won’t I, though?” For the first time in her life Hannah Mulvaney threw both arms around her mother’s neck, giving her a regular bear hug.

At that moment Welcome Hodgkins was returning across the fields to his lonely home.

"A happy family," he muttered, knocking blooms from the clover with his stick.



"When are you coming home, Hannah?" asked Chinky. "It's awful lonesome without you."

"Well I geth it ith," added Stubbins.

“I’m going to stay three weeks more,” Hannah replied, “and, oh, ma, does table-cloth-ing cost much?”

“There’s some that’s dear, and some that ain’t, — why?”

“Can’t we buy some, ma, and do things the way other folks do?”

Mrs. Mulvaney sighed. “When I was a girl at home,” she said, “we had things right, and after I married your pa I tried to do as my mother did, but children, it was no use. Your pa was out of work so much, and his health wasn’t good,” — Mrs. Mulvaney never referred to the fact that Mr. Mulvaney was a drunkard, — “and somehow I got discouraged, and I ain’t brought you young ones up right. Now I feel glad and thankful we’ve got enough to eat and wear and a good house to live in, but it’s too late for tablecloths.”

“Why?”

“Because, Hannah, Stubbins wouldn’t know no more how to act up against a table-cloth than one of his own pigs.”

“We could learn,” ventured Chinky.

Hannah took courage. “Listen, ma,” said she, “Miss Randall says she never saw such

bright children as we are. She says it's 'mazing the way we learn, only she hopes that when Stubbins gets old enough to go to school he won't keep his pockets loaded full of frogs and toads, the way he does now. Well, if we can learn geography and figures and history things and birds, why can't we learn tablecloths?"

Mrs. Mulvaney shook her head. "You have to be born to tablecloths," said she.

"Hannah wasn't born to big, wide, pink dresses and bows on her hair," announced Chinky, "but look at her, ma, you'd think she'd worn 'em all her life. Not as you need to think you're so smart, Hannah, but I'm talking about tablecloths and being like other folks. Guess I use my eyes when I take home washings, and go after 'em."

"Now, ma, look here. Let's vote about it with grass. All that wants to be pigs and never know nothing go and put a long blade of grass in ma's lap. All what wants to learn manners, put a little, teenty, weenty piece of grass in her lap."

The voting began before Mrs. Mulvaney had time to say a word.

“It’s for tablecloths and manners,” said Mrs. Mulvaney, pretending that the bits of grass were too small to be seen. “And if we use tablecloths the first one that spills anything may get his head knocked off.”

Mrs. Mulvaney had seen her neighbour go home across the fields. Turning to Hannah she changed the subject. “Since you’re all dressed up,” she said, “I suppose you wouldn’t mind going over to Mr. Hodgkins’s on an errand. I bet he’d like a loaf of gingerbread. I made some yesterday for the boys. Now remember, Hannah, be nice and polite, and you, too, Stubbins, for you can go along seeing’s you are all fixed up for Sunday. That man could turn us out of our good home if he wanted to, and you young ones must get on the right side of him. Mind that.”

CHAPTER X

THE HOME THAT WAS LOST ON CHRISTMAS DAY

“WHAT is going to happen?” asked Hannah pausing at Mr. Hodgkins’s front gate and speaking to Stubbins. “I guess he’s going to have company. The front door’s open, and the window’s open, and the side door’s open! What shall we do, Stubbins?”

“Do what ma thed, and give him the cake, and leth get a look at the company.”

“Shall we go to the front door or the back door?”

“Leth go to the front door, and get a look at hith houthe, too.”

One glance at the long, gloomy hall and Hannah turned away. “You can stay there and knock if you want to,” she said, “but it’s too lonesome for me. I am going to the kitchen door.”

“Well, thay, wait, tho I am too. There

he ith, Hannah, ther ith Mithter Hodgkinth thanding by the well."

"What's he looking at?"

The man greeted the children with a smile. "Good morning," he said, "come here and see my brother."

"Why, thath a mud turtle," exclaimed Stubbins, plainly disappointed in the brother. "Thath a mud turtle 'cauth Mith Randall thed tho."

"Now, watch," continued Mr. Hodgkins. "You see, children, this old mud turtle is going on about his business just as all the creatures around here are doing, only he moves a little slowly, to be sure. Now I am going to give this brown hen over here a touch with my stick and you'll see what will happen."

"It'll thquawk!" predicted Stubbins, and he was right. The brown hen made herself heard all over the yard as she flew away.

"Made the feathers fly, didn't she?" laughed the man. "Now we'll see what the mud turtle will do. I won't hit him a bit harder than I did the hen."

A knock on the mud turtle's back; he stopped crawling and in went his head.

"You'd think he was killed!" Hannah exclaimed.

"Well, he ith a queer one," commented Stubbins.

"Now you know why I call the mud turtle my brother," declared Mr. Hodgkins. "Most people are like hens. When something strikes them hard they make a big fuss about it, and after they flutter around a while they go about their business exactly as they did before. I'm like the mud turtle. I crawled into my shell, and now they say I'm a queer one, as Stubbins says of the turtle."

Hannah turned red. How did Mr. Hodgkins know that the neighbours called him queer, and why was he a friendless man?

"Did something strike you hard, Mr. Hodgkins?" she asked, in tones of sympathy.

"I should like to tell you and your little brother about it if you care to listen," was the reply. "You children seem like old friends. I've stayed so long in my shell I seem to have forgotten who my friends were, and I once had plenty of them. I suppose I have myself to thank, but do you know I

don't suppose there's any one left in the world who ever gives me a kindly thought."

Hannah suddenly remembered her errand. "Ain't there, though?" she cried. "Didn't ma go and bake this gingerbread yesterday for you, and don't she say you're the best man that ever breathed?"

"Yeth, thath what," added Stubbins.

Mr. Hodgkins looked pleased. "Did she do that for me?" he asked, taking the gingerbread from Hannah, "well, your mother is a good woman."

"Thath what," assented Stubbins, "and uth kidth are nithe kidth too."

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself," chided Hannah, but the three laughed and the sunlight danced among the leaves. It was a bright Sunday.

"To-day," began Mr. Hodgkins, "I have opened my house for the first time in many a long year. Come with me and see what a big pleasant home I used to have."

"Ain't you got it now?" demanded Stubbins.

"No," was the response, "I have the house,

my boy, but the home was lost one Christmas day."

"Lohtt your home on Chrithmuth?" questioned the child.

"Come, I will show you a room that the sunlight has never shone upon since that same Christmas."

Silently the children followed Mr. Hodgkins in the house, through the kitchen, into the hall.

"This was my home when I was a boy," he went on, "and here I brought my wife before my father and mother died. We'll go in the parlour first and I'll show you a picture. You see, I've opened the parlour."

By this time even Stubbins was speechless with wonder, and clung to Hannah as though he feared to lose her in the strange man's house. Everything in the parlour was covered with dust. In spite of the feeling of awe that stole over her, Hannah noticed the good furniture and all that the room contained.

"Here's the picture, children," said Mr. Hodgkins, opening an album.

Without speaking, Hannah and Stubbins gazed at the photograph.

“They were mine,” said the man, softly, “my little girl, my little boy, and their mother.”

It seemed to Hannah that if her life had depended upon it, she could not have said a word.

“Come,” suggested Mr. Hodgkins at last, as he closed the door and left the parlour, closely followed by the children. “This was our sitting-room,” he continued, pausing before a locked door. “This is the first time in ten years that I have ever turned the key.”

Hannah’s impulse was to run, but when the door was opened she felt as if her feet were growing into the floor. As for Stubbins his eyes came so near popping out of his head they really ached for an hour afterward. What the children saw was a Christmas tree yellow with age. It was a pitiful sight and belonged in a darkened room where Santa Claus might not stumble upon it.

“We’ll have some air and light,” said Mr. Hodgkins, raising the shades and opening the windows.

The tree looked ghastly in the sunshine as it stood revealed with all its faded, dusty trim-

things. Here and there among the branches were children's treasures, a small china doll, a tin horn, a drum and a calico elephant. Beside the tree were two small rocking-chairs and on the floor were books.

"Oh, dear," whispered Hannah.

"There, child," sympathized Mr. Hodgkins, "I didn't bring you in here to make you sad, but this is my secret, and I thought if you could see this room perhaps we might be better friends. I thought perhaps you would understand your queer neighbour."

"How did it happen?" asked the child, crossing the threshold and standing near the tree, still clinging to Stubbins.

"This room is just as we left it that Christmas Day. We drove to a neighbour's in the afternoon, and while there our little ones went on the ice to play and were drowned. I came into the house before their mother, and the first thing I did was to close this door. The piano was left open just as you see it now. We sang a Christmas hymn that morning. Two months later the children's mother died, and I was left alone.

"All this our neighbours know, but Hannah

and Stubbins, no one ever knew we had a Christmas tree. At first I couldn't take it down nor touch a thing and so the months went by, and at last the years, until like the turtle I have crawled more and more into my shell."

"Oh, dear, dear!" repeated Hannah, no longer trying to keep back the tears.

"Don't cry, Hannah, don't cry, or I shall be sorry you know my secret. Now we'll shut the room again and forget it."

"Don't — don't shut the room up again, Mr. Hodgkins. I wouldn't, if I were you," declared Hannah. "Do you know what I'd do?" she continued, brushing away the tears and speaking earnestly.

"No, what would you do?"

"I'd take away the tree, and then I'd clean the room and use it."

"I've often thought of it, Hannah, but some way I can't do it; and here the old tree stands just as we left it. It's no use, and yet — see here, children, tell your mother I'll give her five dollars if she'll come over to-morrow when I've gone to town, and — and tend to

this room. You may come with her and go all over the house if you choose."

"And then," agreed Hannah, "you and us'll go visiting. Sometimes you come over to our house to see us in our sitting-room, and next day or the next we'll all come over here and visit you in your sitting-room, and we'll be folks. And Mr. Hodgkins, don't you think you're the only man that's had to get along without Christmases, because us kids never had a Christmas in our lives until last year."

"You mean you never had a Christmas tree before, don't you, Hannah?"

"No, I mean we never had a Christmas. We never even knew folks had trees in their houses until now, but you just wait! This year we're going to have one of our own."

"Yeth, and I geth you better come and help uth get it ready," put in Stubbins, "becausthe you know about the way to fixth 'em."

"Thank you," said Mr. Hodgkins, "I'll think about it."

CHAPTER XI

MRS. MULVANEY'S AIR CASTLE

WHEN Mrs. Mulvaney saw the Christmas tree she shook her head. "I'm glad you're with me, Chinky," she began, "I'd hate to be here alone, and what's more, I hate to touch that tree. Poor man! To think how he's missed his folks and him so good. I'd no more take any money for doing a neighbourly act like this than I'd fly."

"Well, ma," observed Chinky, "I'd rather see you with the money than trying to fly with wings. Only think how you'd look! I bet your feet'd drag."

"Young man, if you'd use your eyes more and your tongue less, why then instead of making fun of your poor old mother you'd be learning a lesson from this tree before we take it out."

"What'd I learn?"

“You’d learn how Christmas trees is trimmed. I think we ought to take pattern by this so’s we’d know how to get up our own.”

“Sure enough, ma, I’ll run home and get a pencil and a piece of paper and I’ll draw that tree just as it stands, so we’ll know where to hook up the strings of pop-corn, and the paper trimmings, and have a tree that is a tree.”

Chinky was gone but a short time and soon finished three remarkable sketches which he put in his pocket for future use.

“We’ll have a Christmas this year that’ll make up for lost time,” said Mrs. Mulvaney, smiling at Chinky through clouds of dust. “I believe we shall have to take everything in this room out-doors if we ever expect to get this place clean. How it all comes back to me the way my mother used to do things. We better shut up the piano, though I don’t know so much about this kind as I do about another.”

“You used to call your wash-board a piano, didn’t you, ma?” Chinky remarked.

“So I did, and that ain’t saying’s I liked the music of it, either, still, who knows but our Hannah’ll be learning to play this — I

mean, to play a sure enough piano some day. And Chinky, how'd you like to go to college? "

" Why, Ma Mulvaney! "

" Well, how'd you like it? "

" Not for me, ma, I'm going to raise hens and turkeys, and I don't want to take on any more schooling than I have to. What I'm going to be is a rich farmer. Hannah, she can go to college," and Chinky grinned.

" I shouldn't be a mite surprised," added Mrs. Mulvaney, " if it all happens."

" What's getting into you, ma? " asked the boy. " You're talking just like Sally Brown. I know she thinks that smarty brother of hers'll be the President of the United States."

" Hoping," agreed Mrs. Mulvaney, wiping the dust from two little rockers that she decided would fit Nora and Dora, " hoping is just as Sally Brown says; it won't do one mite of harm, and I hope to see my seven children amounting to something in the world. My! This is a pleasant room. Just see the view from the bay-window. That poor man, to be living here all alone! What are you laughing at, Chinky? "

" Well, ma, let me tell you. The other night

Stubbins and I were over here helping Mr. Hodgkins feed the pigs, — you know he has about twenty-five, — and of course Stubbins he loves the pigs. Well, Mr. Hodgkins said ‘Stubbins, you’d better come over here, and live with me. I’ll give you all the pigs if you will,’ but Stubbins wouldn’t do it; he said, ‘even with the pigth it would be too lone-thome.’”

“And Mr. Hodgkins,” inquired Mrs. Mulvaney, putting the tin horn in a box, and wondering if Mike would ever have a chance to blow it, “what did he say?”

“Oh, nothing much, he laughed and said something about our being lucky kids, and he didn’t blame Stubbins for wanting to stay with his ma.”

Mrs. Mulvaney, with her back to Chinky, nodded her head and squinted her eyes curiously, then turned a big rocking-chair around and sat down for a moment.

“Well, ma, thinking of buying the chair, are you?”

“Why, Chinky?”

“Because anybody’d think you was in a store picking out chairs to take home the way

you try 'em all. Which are you going to keep?"

"All of 'em, like enough, since you're so



bright," admitted the woman, laughing softly as she rocked. "And now say, you get to work and no more fooling. We'll make a bonfire of that tree. That poor man to be coming home from town this noon, and no family here

to meet him and no dinner ready. Come, Chinky, fly around and we'll get his dinner, pudding and all before we leave. What if we was all dead and 'twas your pa?"

Mr. Hodgkins was surprised and pleased when he reached home. Not for years had any one taken the least interest in him. With the coming of the Mulvaney's he began to realize what he had missed. It was pleasant to be on friendly terms with one's neighbours. He was glad the children liked to visit him. They were good children, too; never made him any trouble and were always well behaved. He wondered why Sally Brown had called them quarrelsome, and why she had said Mrs. Mulvaney was cross.

Mr. Hodgkins never saw the little shanty in the city down by the railroad-tracks and the river, where the seven children were packed in like sardines. He never knew how hard was Mrs. Mulvaney's life when she washed clothes from morning until night, merely to keep the seven from starving, so of course he didn't realize that after a few months in the country, a great change had come over the family. At last they were folks.

While Mr. Hodgkins ate his dinner that day, the Mulvaney's gathered for the first time in their lives around a tablecloth, and if the cloth happened to be one of the new sheets folded in half what difference did it make?

"We've got to begin to practise putting on style without losing no more time," declared Mrs. Mulvaney, "and, Chinky, you tell Hannah to ask Sally Brown to come over first chance she gets, and show you young ones table manners. You've got to learn 'em. I may want to ask company in to tea before long, and we don't want no pigs to the table. Watch out, there, Stubbins, you've got your elbow in the butter. If you want something you can't reach, don't climb up on the table after it, that ain't manners. Take your fork and reach over for it this way, do you see?"

"Thay, ma, what if I wath after thyrup! Th'pothe I could hook into that with a fork? Oh, ouw, oh, thay, don't thlap me again. Oh, ouw, thay! I'll be good, I'll be good!"

CHAPTER XII

WELCOME HODGKINS CHOOSES THE CHRISTMAS TREE

It isn't so easy as you might think to choose a Christmas tree. Many a day early as November the seven little Mulvaney's trooped forth in search of one. The woods belonged to Mr. Hodgkins, who by this time had become their much loved ideal. Even Cornelia Mary had changed her mind about the man.

"He doesn't seem half so queer when you really get acquainted with him," she often remarked to her mother. Mrs. Brown and Sally were delighted by the many acts of kindness he showered upon the Mulvaney's, and their friends the Turners began to like him.

It so happened that the reason the seven children were so careful in their choice of a tree, was because Mr. Hodgkins, the Randalls, the Turners, Mrs. Brown, Alfred and Sally

were to share in its joy. The idea of having a Christmas tree was suggested by Mrs. Mulvaney to the unbounded satisfaction of the children.

"Who'll speak the pieces and sing the songs?" demanded Chinky.

"All of us, of course," Hannah replied.

"Catch me speaking a piece to a tree!" sniffed Chinky. "Johnnie and Mike and Stubbins, they can do that."

"Think you're awful smart, don't you?" began Mike, but his mother cut him short with her slipper.

Johnnie was the boy who best knew how easily that slipper came off and should have known better than to laugh at Mike.

"I'll paddle you next," warned Mrs. Mulvaney. "You think you're so cunning. Be quiet, children, and we'll settle about how things is to be done Christmas Eve. We'll have the speaking and the singing first, that being the way it was fixed at the Christmas tree you all went to at the church last year, though land's sake that seems ten years ago, times has changed so much.

"We can sing some hymn tunes together,

company and all, and we'll get Sally and Alfred to speak the stylish pieces, as you might say, and maybe they'll do what Nora and Dora did the last day of school, and speak a Christmas catalogue together."

"Oh, ma," corrected Hannah, "you mean a dialogue."

"Take that," continued Mrs. Mulvaney, boxing Hannah's ears, "and don't be so free with your book learning as to forget your manners to your ma. Nora and Dora, they can speak their old catalogue," this with a severe look at Hannah, who was rubbing her ears, "and Stubbins can speak his piece, and Mike and Johnnie can learn new ones to keep 'em out of mischief."

"Aw," began Mike, but he went no further as the loose slipper showed signs of dropping off his mother's foot.

"And you said, as I remember it," went on Mrs. Mulvaney, "that a church man did some speechifying in front of the tree. Mr. Hodgkins, he's the man that can do that, and when he gets to the end of it we'll all clap our hands."

"Will Thanta Clauth come netht?" in-

quired Stubbins, resting his chin in both hands with his elbows upon his knees.

"Aren't you ashamed," replied Mrs. Mulvaney. "Now don't you s'pose Santa Claus knows we can take care of ourselves this year? He better go where they's poor folks. Moses Aaron, I'm ashamed of you."

"Well, but thay, ma, how about Chrithmuth prethenth?"

"That's where the real fun of Christmas comes in," explained Mrs. Mulvaney; "we make presents for each other. When I was a girl at home my sisters and I used to begin making Christmas presents for our mother and father and aunts and uncles and cousins and for each other, way back in the summer, and then we hid 'em till the time came."

At this point Chinky winked at his mother and nodded his head as much as to say, "You and I know a thing or two."

"Well, Ezra Jonathan," asked his mother, "what are you making a fool of yourself for?"

More winks and shaking of the head this time.

“Well, speak out, Ezra, and don’t set there acting like a dumb idiot.”

“You see, ma,” stammered the boy, still trying the effect of winks, “I thought Santa Claus he wouldn’t mind putting the presents on the tree for us if we left ’em all on the what-not where he could see ’em easy.”

Stubbins caught at the suggestion. “Oh, thay, ma,” he begged, “leth do it, I tell you uth kidth like that old Thanta Clauth. He ith all right. I don’t think Chrithmuth would be half tho nithe if he couldn’t thee our tree and put thome prethents on it.”

“All right,” consented Mrs. Mulvaney returning Chinky’s wink to the best of her ability. Not being used to winking she had to screw up one corner of her mouth to do it. “Now then, after Mr. Hodgkins has his say, Chinky, I mean Ezra Jonathan, can take the presents off the tree and give ’em to Hannah and she can read out the names and Moses Aaron can carry the presents around and if he stubs his toes and breaks anything, I’ll warm his jacket right in front of the company. After that’ll come the Christmas dinner.”

“Dinner at night?” asked Hannah.

“Yes, dinner at night,” was the reply. “That’s when we’re going to have Chink — Ezra’s big turkey. Now ain’t you glad you know manners, and ain’t you little boys glad you picked blackberries enough to pay for our fine company tablecloth and napkins, and ain’t you glad our cellar’s full of vegetables we raised ourselves? And think of the currant jelly Hannah made that’s awaiting for Christmas.”

“We must pick out our tree,” Johnnie broke in, “I think that one I showed you kids last night was the best in the whole bunch.”

“But I don’t,” objected Hannah, “it’s too tall.”

“And the one I got, you say is too short,” pouted Mike.

“And mine was lop-sided,” added Chinky.

“And I can’t decide on any of them,” laughed Hannah.

“Oh, I thay!” cried Stubbins, “I know a man what’ll know a good Chrithmuth tree when he theeth it.”

“That’s a fact,” approved Mrs. Mulvaney, “trot right over and ask Mr. Hodgkins for his advice.”

Appealed to by the seven, Mr. Hodgkins went to the woods with his young neighbours one bright December day and chose a large, perfectly shaped spruce.

"It won't do," declared Hannah.

"Why?"

"It's too big, Mr. Hodgkins, we'd have to cut a hole through the ceiling to make it stand in our sitting-room."

Mr. Hodgkins laughed aloud.

"It's too big," protested the seven.

Mr. Hodgkins laughed again. "I'll go over and talk to your mother about it," said he. "We won't cut the spruce down until Christmas week so it will be fresh and green. If I can make your mother believe this tree is just right, we'll most surely have a Merry Christmas."

The seven were disappointed.

"I think he's crazy," sputtered Chinky on the way home.

"I know he is," grumbled Johnnie, "that tree's high as our chimney."

"Never mind," said Hannah, "ma's got some sense if he ain't. She won't have that great big tree, don't you fret."

“That’s right, ma knows what’s what,” added Chinky, kicking the bright snow from his path and straightening his shoulders. “She’s got a lot of sense.”

CHAPTER XIII

ON THE TRAIL OF SANTA CLAUS

MRS. MULVANEY failed the seven.

"What do you think, anyway?" whispered Chinky when the children were gathered in Hannah's room at bed-time. "What ails ma?"

Hannah shook her head gloomily. "Does anybody know?" she asked.

"Not me," declared Mike. "How'll we ever get such a whoppering tree in the house? She won't even go to look at it."

"Nope," added Johnnie, "ma said first thing that if Mr. Hodgkins thought it was right, it was right, and since he's been over here to talk to her about it you dassn't hardly say tree."

"She — she's getting a new dress made," offered Nora.

"Yes," agreed Dora, "and she says this —

this Christmas party is something we won't never forget."

"I bet we won't, if we have that tree," grumbled Chinky. "We might as well begin chopping holes through the floor and the roof, and I don't know but we'll have to cut a little chunk out of the clouds to make room for our Christmas tree."

"Oh, thay," put in Stubbins, "make the hole in the floor big, Chinky, tho we can look down and thee Thanta Clauth."

"That shows how much little kids know," explained Chinky. "You'll have to get out on the roof, Stubbins, to see Santa Claus, because I suppose when he catches sight of so much tree sticking through the roof he'll think it's the whole thing and he'll hang all the presents up on top of the house."

This speech was greeted by laughter so loud Mrs. Mulvaney opened the stair door and spoke.

"If you young ones don't get in bed inside of five minutes," said she, "you'll be sorry. Now I don't want to hear another sound. How do you suppose I can sew up your Christmas clothes if you make such an uproar?"

The next day Chinky sharpened his hatchet on Mr. Randall's grindstone. In the after-



noon, accompanied by his brothers and sisters he went to the woods to cut down the tree.

“Now you all want to stand back far

enough," cautioned Chinky, "so as to give me enough room to swing my arms."

"Let me chop some," begged Mike.

"Me, too," added Johnnie.

"Look a-here," declared Chinky. "No little shavers allowed on this job. You ought to be glad to have a chance to see me do the chopping."

"Oh, thay," cried Stubbins when the children reached the edge of the woods. "Who'th took our tree? Ith gone."

"It's that Randall kid," sputtered Chinky, scarcely able to believe his eyes. "Look at the stump, will you, all hacked to pieces — he said he bet he knew more about cutting down trees than me. That looks like it! I'll fix him. Come on, don't stand here like ninnies looking at the place where our tree stood."

"Leth — leth tell Mithter Hodgkinth," sobbed Stubbins.

"All right," assented the angry brother, "and then I'll give Smarty Randall a taste of my fist."

"Your tree is gone!" repeated Mr. Hodgkins when the seven burst upon him. "Well, there! I know who took it!"

"Who?" demanded Mike.

"Santa Claus, sir, the rascal! I thought that tree he brought in looked extremely familiar!"

"What tree?" asked Stubbins.

"You come in my sitting-room and see, children."

"It's our tree, sure enough," said Johnnie, "and did he put it up, too?"

"You better believe he did, and what's more, you look in this closet."

Mr. Hodgkins opened a door, allowing the children one brief glimpse of Christmas packages, dolls, books, sleds, and toys of all kinds.

"Oh, oh, oh!" cried the seven.

"They are all for you and every one who comes to the Christmas party," declared the man. "Santa Claus says this house is the place for your party because it's bigger than yours and he brought these presents ahead of time because he is so busy he was afraid he might miss us on Christmas Eve."

"Aw," began Chinky, but checked himself and laughed. "Won't it be jolly," said he, "that is if you don't mind."

"Oh, I'm delighted," insisted Mr. Hodg-

kins, "only I've asked the minister to come and" —

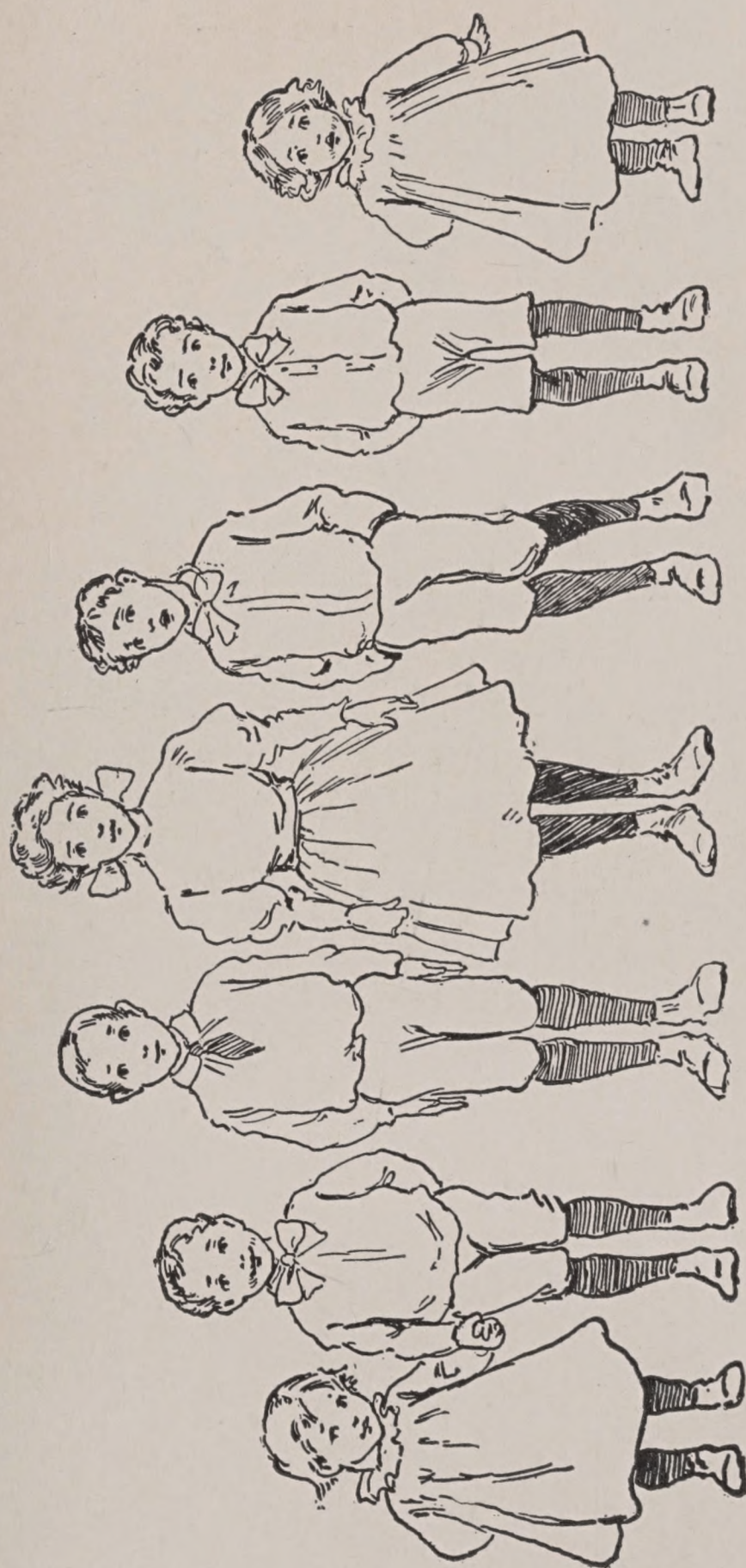
"The minister," groaned Chinky, "what did you go and invite him for?"

"That's all right," interrupted Hannah. "You ought to have the minister to a Christmas tree, don't you remember?"

"It was like this, children," said Mr. Hodgkins. "Your mother said I was to make the speech, but I persuaded her that the minister could do it better."

"Bother the minister," whispered Mike.

"I thay tho, too," echoed Stubbins.



"THE SEVEN STOOD IN A ROW"

CHAPTER XIV

THE HOME THAT WAS FOUND ON CHRISTMAS DAY

GAILY passed the week before Christmas. Every one was busy, every one was happy. Mrs. Mulvaney swept and dusted the house of Welcome Hodgkins from top to bottom. Not a corner escaped her broom.

In the sitting-room the Christmas tree glittered and shone. Frost sparkled on the windows, while outside in the winter sunshine sang the chickadees.

Early Christmas Eve the company arrived, smiling and joyous. Mrs. Mulvaney greeted them in her new gown. The seven stood in a row to welcome Sally and Alfred. The little girls' dresses and the boys' waists were made from the same piece of bright pink chambray, whereat Tom Randall grinned and punched Cornelia Mary.

Everything passed off as Mrs. Mulvaney planned. Stubbins spoke his piece beautifully, the singing was good, and the dialogues were perfect. Mr. and Mrs. Isaac Turner, Mr. and Mrs. Randall, and Sally's mother, having no other part on the program, clapped their hands vigorously at the close of each performance.

Finally, at a signal from Mrs. Mulvaney, the minister rose. "Friends," said he, "my presence here to-night shall no longer be a mystery to you. If Mrs. Mulvaney and Mr. Hodgkins will please step forward, we will give these seven fatherless children a Christmas present."

Stubbins bent forward with his mouth open, and listened in amazement while the minister married his mother to Welcome Hodgkins. He was the first to speak at the close of the ceremony.

"Well, thay! that wath a thurprithe, but ith a good one."

Every one seemed to agree with Stubbins, and for awhile the Christmas tree was entirely forgotten. Poor Chinky was so astonished and dazed, he could scarcely cut the gifts from the tree when reminded of his duty. At last

his mother brought him to his senses by a more or less gentle shake.

“Well, ma,” laughed Chinky, “it’s you, ain’t it? I almost didn’t know you for a minute.”

“Don’t you be sassy,” chided his mother, “or you’ll get something besides Christmas presents right here in front of your second pa and the company.”

Chinky didn’t look a bit alarmed, and in the midst of fun and excitement did his part in the distribution of the gifts.

At the dinner-table Stubbins snuggled close beside his new father. “Well,” said he, and all the children agreed with him, “I thay this ith thertainly a Merry Chrithmuth!”

THE END.

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